



## Respectful and Responsive Relationships Are Key to Supporting Optimal Infant and Toddler Development

Responsive relationships truly make up the heart of what you do in your work with young children and families. For infants and toddlers, all learning happens in the context of their relationships with the important adults in their lives.

—National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning (n.d., p.1)

### Family-Child Relationships

Through relationships, infants and toddlers learn about their environment and how to interact with the world around them. The relationships infants and toddlers have with their families are the most important in shaping emotional and social development. Within their families, infants and toddlers begin to learn the skills they will need throughout life. As a member of a family, an infant or toddler begins to develop a sense of identity connected to family culture. Getting to know children within the context of their families gives you important information about who children are and how they relate to the world.

[Positive Parent-Child Relationships](#) (National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement, 2013) describes the importance of the parent-child relationship and offers ideas about how to support respectful and supportive relationships between children and their families. In this article, you will find information about

- ◆ how parents can build positive parent-child relationships;
- ◆ how positive parent-child relationships look different in different families; and
- ◆ how child care programs and providers like you can encourage these important relationships.

### Caregiver-Child Relationships

As a primary caregiver, you have the chance to commit to the development of respectful and responsive relationships with the infants and toddlers in your care. Caregivers show *respect* to babies when they treat them as they themselves would like to be treated—as human beings, not as objects (Cheshire, 2007). Some examples of respectful caregiving include talking to babies, explaining what you are doing and why, and adjusting your tone of voice and pace to the child's level. You can also engage in responsive interactions by reading children's cues and responding in ways that ensure that the child feels heard and valued.

Respectful caregiving might look different for each child. The time you invest in developing relationships with families supports your ability to have respectful and responsive interactions with infants and toddlers. As you partner with families, you can learn about what communications looks like at home, typical ways the child communicates, and the family's care routines—all information that can you can use to support your interactions with the child in your program.

The caregiver-child relationship is built in the moment-to-moment interactions that happen throughout the day. It is worthwhile to consider how everyday care routines offer focused opportunities for responsive and respectful interactions that build your relationship and support a child's learning. Think about diaper changing, for example. You show respect to an infant when you begin diaper changing by choosing a moment when the child is not



overly focused on exploration, slowly approaching at her level, waiting for her to acknowledge you, and then saying that it's time for a diaper change. You show responsiveness by pausing to wait for the child's response, and continuing to engage in a back-and-forth interaction in response to her cues throughout the diaper-changing process. You continue to show respect by letting the infant know what you are going to do before you do it (for example, "I'm going to pull down your pants") and encouraging the child's participation whenever possible (for example, "Can you lift up your arm for me?"). You also support the child's learning, such as naming their sensations (for example, "This is a little wet isn't it? I think it's a little cold on your bottom."). You may have several chances to have these one-on-one exchanges during diaper changing each day.

Children's development in all areas is enhanced by respectful and responsive relationships with you. Think about these examples:

Ten-month-old Sofia is sitting on the floor, playing with stacking rings. As her caregiver, Ms. Patricia, walks by, Sofia reaches her arms toward her, indicating that she wants to be picked up. Ms. Patricia stops, picks her up, and says, "How are you doing, Sofia?" Although this interaction is simple, it plays an important role in supporting Sofia's emotional development. Responding promptly to Sofia's request to be picked up helps Sofia develop a sense of trust in Ms. Patricia as someone who will be there to meet her needs.

Ask yourself the following:

- ◆ Can you think of an example when you responded promptly to an infant or toddler in your care? How did the child respond to your action(s)?
- ◆ Are there things that get in the way of your ability to respond promptly with this type of respectful and responsive care?
- ◆ What changes can you make to increase your ability to provide responsive and respectful care?

Kia, who is 24 months old, is sitting in the cozy area, looking at books. Another child, Thomas, sits down next to Kia, looking at the book she is holding. Kia reacts strongly to his being so close to her. She screams, "No! This is mine!" and then lies down on the floor, crying loudly and kicking her feet. The caregiver, Joseph, recognizes that this strong reaction is unusual for Kia, who usually enjoys playing with Thomas. Knowing Kia well, Joseph realizes that when Kia gets tired, she tends to have a melt down over even the slightest intrusion into her space. He approaches Kia and sits nearby. He comments that Kia seems upset and he gently rubs Thomas on the back and smiles at him. Knowing that rocking is soothing to Kia, Joseph says to her, "Let's go rock," waits a few seconds for Kia to respond, and slowly picks her up and carries her to the rocking chair to rub her back. After rocking with her for a little bit and reading her cues, Joseph gently places her on a mat so that she can rest. By being responsive to Kia's needs in the moment, Joseph is supporting the development of her self-regulation skills, allowing her to have successful interactions with her friends.

Ask yourself the following:

- ◆ Can you think of an example when you helped a child in your care regulate his or her emotions? Do you have specific strategies that help soothe specific infants and toddlers in your care?
- ◆ Are there particular situations during which you find it harder to help a child regulate his or her emotions?
- ◆ What might help you build skills to be able to provide more responsive care in these situations?

Fourteen-month-old Jorge is cruising around the coffee table while holding onto the edge. When he gets to the end of one side, he pauses and looks over his shoulder at his caregiver, Ms. Diana, as if to say, "Will I be OK if I let go? Are you here to help me if I need it?" Ms. Diana smiles and says, with an encouraging tone, "You can do it, Jorge. Keep on going." Jorge then turns back to the coffee table and continues moving, letting go of the edge, trying to walk on his own. In this situation, Jorge shows his secure relationship with Ms. Diana by relying on her for support. This moment reflects a history of moments in which Ms. Diana was responsive



to Jorge's cues and Jorge established trust. By feeling encouraged and safe to take the risk of letting go of the coffee table, Jorge is developing stronger motor skills and self-confidence.

Ask yourself the following:

- ◆ Can you think of ways you helped a child in your care feel safe, valued, and encouraged? How did the child respond to you?
- ◆ Is there anything that gets in the way of you providing this kind of sensitive response?
- ◆ What changes can you make to increase your ability to give responsive and respectful care?

Trina, an infant care teacher, is holding 5-month-old Jaliyah on her knee and moving gently. They are smiling at each other and clearly enjoying the interaction. Jaliyah says, "Bababa." Trina responds with "Bababa," which causes Jaliyah to giggle. Jaliyah then says, "Bababa. Dadada." Trina again repeats Jaliyah's sounds, with "Bababa. Dadada." Jaliyah again giggles, expressing her delight at their exchange. By taking turns in conversation, Trina is supporting Jaliyah's language development. Within this warm and responsive relationship, Jaliyah develops a sense of worth in her efforts at communication and will feel encouraged to try them again.

Ask yourself the following:

- ◆ Can you describe an example when you engaged in a back-and-forth interaction with an infant or toddler? How did the child respond?
- ◆ Are there times when it is challenging to pause and support back-and-forth communication?
- ◆ Who or what might help you improve your ability to have respectful and responsive back-and-forth interactions?

These simple interactions are all examples of responsive care. Such moments may be very familiar to you from your daily work with infants and toddlers. When you are responsive with each child in your care, you are giving the vital support that is necessary for learning and growth in all areas of development.

## Resources

[\*News You Can Use—Developmentally Appropriate Practice\*](#) (September 2011), by the Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, addresses the importance of responsive relationships with infants and toddlers as well as how continuity of care and primary caregiving support relationship building.

[\*Relationships: The Heart of Development and Learning\*](#) (2010), by the National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative, offers information and activities that address the ways in which positive relationships support infants' and toddlers' learning and development.

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